Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony of Simeon Swetzof - Mayor

and

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City of Saint Paul, Pribilof Islands, Alaska

Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Committee on Resources - U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this issue of critical importance for the community of 700 Pribilof Aleuts where we live. The rich marine ecosystem around the Pribilofs supports the largest concentrations of marine mammals, seabirds, and fish stocks in the Northern Hemisphere. As a people whose traditions and survival are bound to the marine wildlife sustained by the Bering Sea, the Pribilof Aleuts are concerned about the long-term future of the Steller sea lion and the continued health of the Bering Sea fisheries and ecosystem. For generations, Steller sea lions have been an important source of food for Aleuts and other native peoples, and the traditions involved in the subsistence hunt of sea lions and other species are an important part of our culture.

In recent years the community of St. Paul has developed a port and other infrastructure necessary to attract in-shore processors and allow the development of a local fishery. Located within 65 miles of more than 50% of the nation's commercial fisheries, St. Paul's harbor is today one of the busiest in Alaska and has become the second highest generator of fish tax revenue for the State. Our small boat commercial fishing fleet is one of the most successful in the State, in terms of its ability to harvest the species it is allowed to target. Improvements to the Harbor financed by the federal, state, and local governments, are underway which will further enhance St. Paul's importance to the fishery.

As a result, the community of St. Paul, the State of Alaska, and the Federal Government have an important economic stake in the continued health of the Bering Sea's commercial fisheries, the survival of threatened and endangered species such as the Steller sea lion, and the management measures implemented by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (the Council) to regulate the fisheries and the ecosystem.

The City of St. Paul has participated actively in recent Council hearings on the management changes in the

Bering Sea pollock fishery recommended by NMFS to protect Steller sea lions and other issues. At these hearings the Mayor of St. Paul has provided testimony and community statements on behalf of the Pribilof Aleuts and subsistence hunters urging NMFS, and the Council, to act conservatively in implementing protection measures that could adversely impact Alaska's fishermen, its fishing industry, and fishery-dependent communities like St. Paul.

This is particularly true when the causes impeding the recovery of the Steller sea lion are not fully understood and the scientific evidence is inconclusive. While these causes are not completely understood, and may never be, given the array of possible contributing factors, the community of St. Paul supports: 1) increased funding for research into ecosystem management, and 2) greater local participation in resource management, including scientific research at the local level in locations such as the Pribilofs that allow for the use of native/traditional knowledge. We believe that a critical component missing in NMFS' analysis and biological opinion are the economic, cultural, and biological impacts of their actions on local communities such as St. Paul, and the wealth of native knowledge and local input that has been bypassed by NMFS scientists and regulators. Focusing resources and attention on the above two proposals will permit the development of adequate responses that will possibly help to reverse the Steller sea lion's decline and contribute to the general health of the Bering Sea ecosystem. We urge you to consider them.

1. Increased Funding for Research:

The unique hydrophysical and biological processes surrounding the Pribilof Islands create a marine ecosystem which supports the largest populations of seabirds, marine mammals, and fish stocks in the Northern Hemisphere. For this reason, St. Paul Island is an ideal location for research and studies on a local level to understand these processes and develop effective resource management policies.

In the past, the City of St. Paul and the U.S. Department of State have co-sponsored studies such as *The Bering Sea Ecosystem*, a book prepared by the National Research Council in 1996 and the *Pribilof Marine Ecosystem Research Program* by Dr. Mikhail Flint of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Both studies support the conclusion that a fisheries management regime that considers the ecosystem as a whole, and is not framed in a single species context, ensures sustainable commercial fisheries and healthy marine mammal and seabird populations. The focus of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management, therefore, is to prevent the creation of imbalances in fish stocks that in turn may impact and create imbalances in predatory species such as Steller sea lions and affect the long-term viability of the commercial fisheries.

Congress must remember that during the 1980's the City of St. Paul was a leading voice in the Bering Sea calling for ecosystem research and management. The City, in conjunction with the State Department and some members of the environmental community, faced the opposition of the fishing industry, the Council, and even NMFS, to push through the National Research Council study. Now that work is cited by everyone as the starting point for fisheries research and policy-making in the Bering Sea. The City of St. Paul has been a leader in the effort to understand and manage these issues, and will continue to be involved.

The City of St. Paul, moreover, supports further research into the natural processes and dynamics of the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska ecosystems, in order to shed light on phenomena such as the "regime shifts" and predator-prey interaction. For example, there have been higher than usual reported incidences of killer whale attacks on sea lions and sea otters and many have attributed the declining Steller sea lion populations to these attacks. Very little is understood about these interactions and their impact on the health of the Steller sea lion population as a whole. Others have indicated that subsistence hunting has impeded the recovery of Steller sea lions. However, this disregards the fact that killer whales and Native Alaskans have

consumed Steller sea lions for thousands of years and in doing so contributed to maintaining healthy sea lion populations and keeping the ecosystem in balance.

The small community of St. Paul has for years spent considerable City funds to support studies in the aforementioned areas and believes that they point the direction as to how commercial fisheries can be sustainably managed to the benefit of fishermen, coastal communities, industry, and the ecosystem. These studies also indicate that we know very little about the natural processes that govern the ecosystem. For this reason we support and welcome increased funding by the State and Federal administrations for research on ecosystem-based management and the natural processes that govern the ecosystem, including the area around the Pribilof Islands. Only by understanding how the ecosystem functions can we hope to develop the policies that are necessary to manage the commercial fisheries sustainably and protect the health of endangered species such as the Steller sea lion.

2. Local Participation and Use of Native/Traditional Knowledge:

Stewardship of marine wildlife, including Steller sea lions, and marine fisheries must be improved by increasing participation of Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska coastal communities in policy and decision-making affecting these resources. When coastal communities and their residents are given a stake in the health of the resources in state and federal waters, long-term sustainability becomes an achievable goal.

In the Pribilof Islands, the Ecosystem Conservation Office has formed a Pribilof Islands Marine Mammal Commission to promote proper subsistence hunting techniques, and encourage the conservation of sea lions and other marine mammals through traditional knowledge and scientific research. In addition, the Ecosystem Conservation Office has developed co-management agreements with NMFS to share responsibilities in the management of Steller sea lions and Northern fur seals. The people of St. Paul believe that co-management agreements may present an effective way of protecting Steller sea lions on the local level because they engage the local population in the management and protection of species that are culturally and economically valuable to the community, and allow for the exchange of information between members of the community and NMFS scientists.

With an important cultural and economic stake in the protection and conservation of endangered or threatened Bering Sea species, the Pribilof Aleuts support efforts to incorporate Native concerns and knowledge into the decision-making process. The people of my community have an extensive, generations-long, body of knowledge regarding Steller sea lion behaviors, eating habits, foraging areas, migration patterns, and rookeries that has been often overlooked by NMFS and outside scientists.

For this reason we support partnering between federal, state and local agencies, environmental organizations, community and Native organizations and scientists to collaboratively develop plans to protect Steller sea lion populations on a local level, and particularly in critical habitat areas such as the Pribilof Islands. This plan must be tailored to the area designated for protection as the factors affecting sea lions may be different in diverse geographical areas. Moreover, protection plans should incorporate and seek ways of channeling, to the extent possible, the wealth of local and traditional knowledge which exists in most Alaskan communities but which is often disregarded or underutilized by outside scientists.

3. Management of the Bering Sea Commercial Fisheries:

NMFS' biological opinion bases its recommended actions in the pollock fishery on the argument that the fishing effort is concentrated too intensively during the fall and winter seasons in certain geographic areas,

which include Steller sea lion critical habitat and foraging areas. For this reason they recommended that the Council implement measures that have dispersed the pollock fishery temporally and spatially away from the Aleutian Chain towards the central Bering Sea and the Pribilof Islands.

One of St. Paul's future objectives is to develop multispecies processing capability (including pollock) in-shore. There are several advantages to this from the perspective of the fishing industry and NMFS. Multispecies processing capability on St. Paul Island would allow a portion of the fishing fleet that has been dispersed by NMFS' recommended actions to use St. Paul Island as a base, thereby reducing costs, increasing efficiency (by reducing unproductive delivery time), reducing dead loss, and increasing safety for fishermen. Use of the St. Paul Harbor allows the intensive fishery effort in the Bering Sea to be distributed throughout the entire ecosystem in a manner that has less localized impact on Steller sea lions, and other species, and is consistent with NMFS' objectives. Finally, St. Paul sees multispecies processing capability on the island as an important part of bringing processing in-shore and developing sustainable fisheries in a way that is consistent with the goals of the Sustainable Fisheries Act and the American Fisheries Act.

Ultimately, conservation of the commercial fisheries, seabirds, and marine mammals of the Bering Sea will be achieved through management policies that promote in-shore processing, local stewardship and co-management, an ecosystem approach to the utilization of fisheries, and joint management of straddling and migratory fish stocks with the Russian Federation.

These are issues that the people of the Pribilofs have advocated for years. The Pribilof Islands are literally in the middle of these issues and are a key piece to: 1) understanding the processes affecting the Bering Sea ecosystem and 2) gauging the success of measures implemented to protect the Steller sea lion and other species. The people of St. Paul are aware of the importance of balancing the needs of the subsistence hunters, the fishermen, the fishing industry, and the ecosystem. We have done this balancing for hundreds of years.

Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of the Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife, and Oceans Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the City of St. Paul. We look forward to discussing these issues with you and your staffs.

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